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# Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas

## Report of the Secretary-General

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# I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 52/93 of 12 December 1997, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare, in consultation with Member States, a comprehensive report on the current status of rural women and prospects for improving their situation, and to submit it, through the Economic and Social Council, to the General Assembly in 1999.

2. Towards that end, the Secretary-General circulated a note verbale to all Member States and a letter to the specialized agencies and to other United Nations entities soliciting contributions to the report. Replies were received from 14 Governments and eight specialized agencies and other United Nations entities.[1] The replies were incorporated into the present report and will also be reflected in the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.[2]

3. The issue of rural women has been addressed at various United Nations conferences and summits[3] and is contained in their respective final documents, including declarations and plans of action. Issues relating to rural women are raised throughout the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women also attach considerable significance to the situation of rural women.[4] The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women obligates States Parties to "take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy", and to "take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas".[5] Further, the issue of rural women remains critical to the development discourse and strategy-making process because of the central role of rural women in both the productive and reproductive spheres, as demonstrated by their involvement in agricultural production and care-giving.

4. The questions of equal access to productive resources, such as land, capital, credit and technology, and to gainful employment, markets, education and health, including family planning services, are critically important for rural women. So are infrastructure developments such as rural electrification, water supply and childcare facilities. Furthermore, the full and equal participation of women in rural institutions and decision-making and specific measures to improve the status of women are still critical to any strategy aimed at the improvement of the situation of rural women. Most of these issues have been dealt with extensively in the past reports of the Secretary-General.[6]

5. Since the preparation of the 1997 report, the context within which the above issues is considered has changed significantly as the process of market integration which has characterized the global economy for some time has accelerated. The greater interdependence among different national economies sets new priorities and poses new policy considerations for Governments. This changing context and its impact on women, including rural women, within the world of work will be considered in the forthcoming 1999 edition of *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, which was requested by the General Assembly in its resolutions 40/204 and 49/161 and which will be before the Assembly for its consideration at its fifty-fourth session. The *World Survey* examines the economic development in terms of increased participation of women in paid work, the increasingly casual and informal nature of employment, and the increasing trend towards privatized and commercialized agriculture.

6. The present report outlines the impact of global trends and their policy implications for the situation of rural women and considers questions of access to productive resources, inputs and services. It was prepared on the basis of a review of existing literature, in addition to the replies from Member States and United Nations entities to the note verbale and the letter of the Secretary-General. The topics were selected because they featured prominently in the replies. By analysing the situation of rural women within the context of emerging trends and policy considerations, the report aims to identify guidelines for new strategies for improving the situation of rural women in accordance with the objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

7. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1997/60 of 25 July 1997, decided to carry out a comprehensive review of the theme of poverty eradication during its substantive session in 1999. The present report therefore aims to contribute to the Council's deliberations on that theme by drawing attention to the continuing poverty of rural women in spite of their considerable role in agricultural production. The issue of rural women's poverty also featured prominently in the replies of Member States and United Nations entities to the note verbale and letter of the Secretary-General.

## II. Trends and policy issues pertaining to the situation of rural women

8. The context in which rural women experience poverty, engage in agricultural production, and struggle for access to the productive resources, inputs and services that are crucial for optimal participation in socio-economic activities has changed considerably. It is more then ever before governed by a process characterized by the liberalization of trade and markets for food and other products, increasing privatization of resources and services, the reorientation of economic policies under structural adjustment programmes, and increased commercialization of agriculture.

9. Agricultural development policies in developing countries are becoming more oriented towards reliance on markets and private agents.[7] With the commercialization of agriculture, the market place has a more important role to play than it did in the past. More inputs into agricultural production processes are acquired through the market, and more agricultural outputs are sold through the market than has hitherto been the case. Farmers now have to shift from subsistence agricultural production to the growing of cash and export crops.

10. The liberalization policies which are part of structural adjustment programmes promote the elimination of trade and market barriers and the reduction of government-financed price supports for basic agricultural commodities. They favour large-scale farming and the production of commercial cash and export crops over food crops for household and local consumption, on the assumption that increases in income from exports will ensure national food security.[8] Further, these policies involve the scaling-down of government-sponsored agricultural services, such as training and extension services, thus reducing the ability of small farmers and rural households to benefit from market forces through skill enhancement. They also involve a reduction in investment in rural infrastructure which, owing to poor and deteriorating rural infrastructure such as roads, reduces the market access of rural people, especially rural women.

11. The privatization of productive resources and inputs is part of this process. Although markets are, in theory, open to everyone, poor rural people, especially women, are unable to take advantage of the market system because they lack three essentials: information about new laws and programmes; the money to purchase land; and access to credit.

12. One consequence of globalization is a rural economy that is more integrated within both the national and the global markets. As a result, in the rural economy, cash and wage income has become as critical as access to land, if not more critical. A study on the impact of privatization on gender and property rights in sub-Saharan Africa concludes that women who are able to accumulate enough money to buy land are usually employed, urban women or women in peri-urban areas who grow food for the urban market.[9]

13. Thus, to the extent that cash and wage income has become central to household food security in the rural areas of developing countries, the crucial factor in rural economies is monetization. Access to cash is a major bottleneck for the poor and the landless when acquiring other productive resources and inputs necessary for survival.

14. Rural households are responding to the uncertainties and opportunities created by the increased dependence on the market by diversifying their household resource base by restructuring the division of labour within the household. In this restructuring, some members of the household remain on the land, freeing others to seek work elsewhere. Therefore, instead of permanent out-migration, as was the case during earlier periods of modernization of agriculture, a temporary/seasonal, short-term movement of labour seems to be on the rise. This phenomenon has been referred to in the literature as "circular migration", or as a land-based/free-floating labour force.[10] The actual adaptive patterns vary significantly across the globe. Depending upon the prevailing norms and patterns of gender relations and the opportunities, household strategies may favour either male or female migration. In the Middle East and Africa, women have generally taken over the work on the land, freeing male members of the household to migrate in search of work elsewhere, while in Latin America and Asia, women for a long time have been the principal labour migrants, internally and internationally.

15. Such strategies at the household level are clearly a response to the process of globalization which favours the free movement of capital and restricts the movement of labour. Both the available data and the existing tools of analysis are insufficient for understanding these processes of change in rural communities. There is need for further comparative research to depict the diverse yet common aspects of the way in which rural people, particularly rural women, have responded, and are responding, to change.

16. At the macro level, the international policy framework which is being driven by the process of globalization has a direct impact on the well-being and options of rural people, and rural women in particular. The twin policies of structural adjustment and privatization were in part a response to changing patterns in the flows of trade and finance. The terms of trade for commodity exports of the developing

countries have been declining steadily. Development assistance from the developed to the developing countries has also been declining.

17. In order to cope with the resultant reduced earnings, balance-of-payment problems and debt crises, many Governments in developing countries have had to curtail their budget expenditures, particularly social-sector expenditures. This situation has clear gender implications. Although both women and men lose out directly from cuts in expenditures on education, health, and other social-sector budget lines, the cost for women, particularly rural women, is more severe, since women experience increased demand for their unpaid labour because of their greater role in reproductive activities. For example, cuts in the health budget increase the care-giving responsibilities of rural women, while cuts in rural infrastructure developments, such as irrigation and water supply systems, increase their time burden. This is in addition to lower returns on women's labour in terms of their wages and income from cash and export crops as a result of the deteriorating terms of trade for agricultural commodities.

18. There has been a dramatic but uneven increase in the flow of private capital, particularly equity capital, to developing countries.[11] In order to alleviate the balance-of-payment and debt problems and to increase income, many developing countries have adopted "investor friendly" policies such as low or no corporate taxes, tax holidays, subsidies to investors, and privatization.

19. The pursuit of such policies has gender implications similar to those described above, because a combination of low or no corporate tax and low earnings from depressed commodity prices results in the erosion of the fiscal base of the State. This results in budget cuts, particularly in the social sector, which have the same dual impact on women, especially rural women, noted above.

20. Since equity capital constitutes a major proportion of the private capital flows to developing countries, many such countries are seeking to attract capital by pursuing policies of privatization of productive assets such as land. Access to land is now being mediated through the market. As discussed below (paras. 28–34) and in prior reports, the issue of access to land and other productive assets remains critical to rural women. In the market system emerging as a result of privatization, women, who generally have few assets or property, little cash income and minimal political power, are being left on the periphery.[12]

21. Liberalization policies have had their successes, particularly in terms of employment opportunities for women. Some African countries have diversified their commodity exports to include non-traditional agricultural exports such as flowers and luxury fruits. Earnings from these exports have risen very rapidly in recent years, and women comprise the majority of the workforce in the sector. They are paid in cash for their labour, whereas on family farms, their labour was unremunerated.[13] In Latin America, especially Mexico and Colombia, in the well-established non-traditional agricultural export sector, women comprise the majority of the workforce. However, the wages are, in relation to profit, quite low, and the occupational hazards can be severe.[14]

22. Liberalization policies go hand in hand with the policy of commercialization of agriculture in developing countries. Through such policies, multinational corporations are consolidating their involvement in agriculture with mixed outcomes for rural women. For example, in Thailand, women working on family-owned land under contract to multinational companies earned cash income for the first time after years of unpaid labour in intensive rice cultivation.[15] However, the vertical integration of the agricultural sector which comes with the involvement of multinational corporations makes rural household food security vulnerable to market fluctuations.

23. These evolving policy issues provide the context in which rural women struggle to gain access to productive resources, services and inputs. First, the integration of rural economies within both the national and the international markets means that governmental policies on their own cannot determine the access of rural women to productive resources and services. Secondly, the "static" approach of provision of access to productive resources such as land will not suffice. A much more dynamic approach is now required — one that entails the empowerment of the rural poor, particularly rural women, by increasing the capabilities that will enable them to navigate the market system.

24. The need for strengthening the capabilities of the rural poor, especially of rural women, has been acknowledged in the replies from Governments to the Secretary-General's note verbale. Most of the Governments referred to their commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and gave detailed accounts of newly created or existing institutional arrangements for the advancement of rural women and for strengthening their role in agriculture. Many outlined measures that have been or are being undertaken to ensure women's participation in decision-making and rural institutions. Support for and cooperation with women's groups and non-governmental organizations is a feature of all governmental strategies aimed at improving the situation of rural women. For their part, the United Nations entities

indicated their support in terms of financing, training and provision of information to women's groups and non-governmental organizations and of governmental efforts to involve women in decision-making and rural institutions. This strategic approach by the specialized agencies is tied to their efforts to mainstream a gender perspective into their respective fields of operation.

25. Support for women's full involvement in decision-making and participation in rural institutions and for rural women's increased personal and organizational capabilities is important, because access to productive resources, services and inputs is negotiated within a political and socio-economic institutional framework that tends to be gender-biased.[16]

## III. Access to productive resources and services

26. The question of access to productive resources and services has been the subject of past reports.[6] It is being considered in the present report within the context of the new trends and policy developments. Access to productive resources, services and inputs is essential if the rural poor, especially rural women, are to be raised out of poverty and enabled fully to contribute to sustainable human development. This is in tandem with the new approaches to poverty alleviation, discussed below in section IV, which focus on both entitlements and human capabilities.

27. In their replies to the note verbale, most of the Governments identified access to productive resources, particularly land, as critical to the improvement of the situation of women. Many of the replies[17] focused on legal reforms which have been introduced to ensure rural women's access to land. The United Nations entities[18] also identified access to land as crucial for rural women and reported that they were assisting Governments, through projects and financing, to realize the objective of providing access to productive resources to rural women.

### A. Access to land

28. Land is a critical resource for rural women. It is important for food production for the household and for market-oriented agricultural activities. Land ownership is also critical to raising the social status of rural women and to facilitating their access to benefits and services such as credit and extension, which tend to be conditional on land as collateral.

29. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), access to land for the rural poor can be effected in the following ways: land redistribution (from larger holdings above a certain size); adjudication of traditional land systems (basically privatization of land previously held under customary tenure); settlement schemes (setting up poor families on newly developed and/or government-owned land for cultivation and/or grazing); and the establishment of individual usufruct (use) rights or community rights.[19] The implementation of such measures, with due cognizance of a gender perspective, can reduce income inequality and human poverty. Rural women can increase their income and contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable human development if they have access to land.

30. Due to factors such as population growth, desertification and land degradation, arable land per member of the agricultural population of most developing countries has been declining for the past 30 years.[20] Many developing countries have either exhausted their land frontier or cannot afford the cost of new land development.

31. The reduction in available land is further exacerbated in many developing countries by the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a small fraction of the landholders. In Latin America, the region with the highest such concentration, 1.3 per cent of the landowners hold 71.6 per cent of the land under cultivation.[21] Inequality in land ownership is actually greater than the data indicate, because many small holders, particularly women, sharecrop or lease their holdings, and many rural poor have no land at all. Most of Latin America is characterized by *latifundios*, large land-grant estates owned by the few, and *minifundios*, small poor holdings that rarely provide adequate employment on subsistence for a family.[22] These levels of concentration of land also prevail in a number of sub-Saharan African countries such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

32. The policy trends of privatization and commercialization of agriculture favour the consolidation of land and tend to negate legal and agrarian reforms that would bring about a fair distribution of land in rural communities or among rural women. For example, current agricultural policy in sub-Saharan Africa is encouraging the trend towards concentration of land ownership. The assumption is that large-scale and commercial crop-farming will increase productivity and thus ensure national food security.[23] Such policy runs the risk of favouring already better-off farmers, mainly men, who will receive the largest share of the national resources of land, capital, credit and foreign exchange, while women farmers, who are the main

food producers on the continent, will be left in the marginalized and stagnating small-holder sector.[24]

33. The impact of land concentration is compounded by changing property rights regimes, from customary to private. Within customary regimes, women have a tenuous hold on land, their access being indirect and generally dependent on male relatives. Therefore, they are generally unable to claim any ownership rights during the transition to private property regimes, and thus end up landless. In most cases their former user rights under the customary regime also disappear.

34. Theoretically, within the new context of private property regimes rural women should be able to purchase land. However, in practice they generally lack the necessary cash or access to credit.

## B. Access to water

35. Water is both a basic human need and an important productive resource. It helps to improve domestic hygiene and health and enhances childcare as well as crop and/or animal care.[25] Access to clean water is likely to have a marked effect on the amount of time women have for other productive activities or for reproductive activities such as childcare.

36. Irrigation is a land-augmenting activity. It increases agricultural productivity in land under cultivation, enables farmers to grow several crops per year, regulates the flow of water and assists in the conservation of water. Because it increases output, access to irrigation increases household food security and household income. Although it may increase labour-intensive tasks, by and large, it lightens the burden of rural women's work.[26]

37. Unfortunately, investment in irrigation infrastructure and water distribution is low in many developing countries. Only 35 per cent of the crop land in Asia is irrigated, and only 5 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.[27] Moreover, small farmers, including rural women, tend to have limited access to existing irrigation and water distribution infrastructure. For example, in some cases, large-scale, influential farmers get first chance at available water, before it trickles down to the less influential — mostly women farmers.[28] In other cases, women farmers, lacking the necessary connections and power in the local "irrigators committee" or with the Government's "water delegate", find themselves confined to night-time irrigation.[29]

38. Even if access to water were not a problem, women farmers seldom have the savings, credit, or incentive to invest in wells and other water projects. Moreover, rural women are often not involved in the technical management and planning of water and irrigation use, and their interests are therefore often ignored or marginalized. Further, as in the case of land, existing water rights regimes often exclude and marginalize rural women and thus constrain their ability to benefit from water resources and to use them optimally in their farming activities.[30]

39. Aside from access to water, farmers require other inputs such as energy resources, seeds and fertilizer. Programmes like rural electrification are capital intensive and have not been implemented successfully in many developing countries. They are usually only successful as part of a comprehensive rural development strategy aimed at raising rural incomes and expanding the rural economic base. Ready access to energy and water is a significant precondition for reducing what is referred to as the "time poverty"[31] of women, because it eliminates the need to collect water and fuelwood which is a major component of a rural woman's time budget.

## C. Access to technology and research

40. Many countries[32] emphasized the need for rural women's access to technology and research. This need is linked to training and access to information through extension services, rural women's groups and non-governmental organizations. Some of the United Nations entities[33] also emphasized the need for access to technology and basic technical know-how for rural women if they were not to be marginalized by the broader macro-level developments that are having an impact on their lives and the agricultural sector.

41. Technological advances in the agricultural sectors of developing countries have often been carried out without due consideration of local conditions or availability of resources and without consultation with the local people, particularly rural women.[34] Successful agricultural technologies tend to be appropriated by the big landowners who have knowledge, capital, and institutional connections. Rural women generally lack those advantages and therefore tend to be marginalized in acquiring technology.

42. It is important for technology to match local resources and social conditions. For example, the success of capital-intensive mechanization in raising production in the United States of America and Canada cannot be duplicated in developing countries without significant cost in terms of unemployment and dislocation. The displacement of rural labour by capital-intensive technology hits rural women harder than men, because the household food security for

which they have primary responsibility is increasingly dependent on wage income from seasonal work on big farms and plantations. Mechanization can also exacerbate the existing problem of consolidation of landownership, because of the general requirement of economies of scale in order to ensure profitability from technological investments.

43. In the developing countries, the labour-to-land ratio is high, and labour is much cheaper than capital. Thus, technological advances that are land-augmenting — in that they add to the productivity of the land — and that result in an increase in the need for labour will be more appropriate there. The Japanese model of focusing on biological and chemical technology (such as new seeds and fertilizer) and on a high ratio of farm workers per cultivated hectare may be more suited to the developing countries than the mechanization approach of North America.

44. The introduction of new technology in rural areas is often risky. Women farmers are reluctant to accept technological advances whose risks, particularly in terms of the impact on household food security, are not known or are not adequately covered.[35] Many of the technologies developed for the rural areas of developing countries have failed, and this has heightened the distrust of exogenous technology.[36] There are instances of family incomes falling, sometimes to the detriment of household survival, when innovations have been introduced. From a rural woman's perspective, family survival is more important than maximizing long-run output. Therefore, it is more important to avoid any possibility of crop failure than to test new, unproven innovations. In many instances the new methods may not be adapted to local farming conditions, for they may have been inadequately tested in a different environment, and they may have adverse side effects.[37]

45. Rural women are generally not involved in selecting agricultural research topics, and therefore the research agenda does not focus on technology that is suitable for small farmers and labourers or on foods, such as cassava and millet, that loom large in poor people's budgets.[38]

46. Consultation and making information available through extension services is important, particularly to rural women, in order to ensure acceptance of useful technology, such as labour-saving technologies. Household labour-saving devices such as fuel-efficient stoves and food-grinding machines will increase the amount of time women have for productive and reproductive activities and for leisure and self-improvement.

### D. Access to extension services

47. Extension personnel have a crucial role in furthering the access of the rural poor, especially women, to productive resources and new technologies and linking them to research and planning institutions. They should be able to transmit the findings and innovations of agricultural research to the farmers; convey simple technical information and demonstrate it personally; identify difficulties; direct farmers to sources of technical advice and training; identify farmers who are credit risks; and arrange for fertilizer, seeds and other inputs from sources such as government depots.

48. Unfortunately, agricultural extension programmes in many developing countries are not very successful and tend to be gender-biased.[39] Extension personnel tend to be male, ill-paid, ill-trained, and ill-equipped to provide technical help in a gender-sensitive manner. In many instances, they are beholden to the large, influential farmers and neglect the small farmers, who have far less education and political power. They often neglect women, in spite of the demonstrated contribution of women to agriculture.[40]

49. Given the critical role of the extension service in the agricultural sector, such neglect has a significant negative impact on rural women's farming activities. They miss out on critical information regarding new seeds, fertilizers, technological advances and even training and credit. The extension service might be more effective if it included more women and trained its staff in gender-sensitive delivery of services. Extension services should liaise closely with and could be integrated with rural women's groups and non-governmental development organizations, such as loan banks, irrigation authorities, seed and fertilizer distribution centres, agrarian reform agencies, and cooperative organizations.

## IV. Overview of the situation of rural women

### A. Poverty

50. In all of the replies to both the note verbale and the letter of the Secretary-General, there was reference to the prevalence of poverty among the rural poor, especially among rural women. Some Governments[41] and some of the specialized agencies[42] outlined their strategies for poverty alleviation. Most centred on employment creation and basic social-sector investments. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), however,

pointing to the East and South-East Asian experience, emphasized the importance of balanced economic growth for the alleviation of poverty and for the socio-economic advancement of women.

51. Poverty, whether it is defined as the lack of a minimally adequate income or as the lack of essential human capabilities, is still pervasive in the world, particularly in the developing world. Between 1989 and 1994, the percentage of the population in developing countries surviving on income of US $1.00 or less per day was 32, ranging from a low of 4 per cent in the Middle East to a high of 45 per cent in South Asia.[43] By another measure — mortality by the age of 40 — the percentage of the total population for all developing countries in 1995 was 14, ranging from a high of 31 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa to a low of 7 per cent for East Asia.[44] The female illiteracy rate for 1995 was 38 per cent for all developing countries, ranging from a low of 15 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean to a high of 63 per cent for South Asia.[45] Two thirds of the world's 900 million illiterate adults are women,[46] a majority of whom reside in the rural areas of developing countries.

52. The rural poor as a percentage of the population of developing countries is estimated at 37 per cent. The highest rate is 66 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa; Latin America follows with a rural poverty rate of 59 per cent; South and South-East Asia, with 44 per cent; the Middle East, with 34 per cent; and East Asia, with 11 per cent.[47]

53. Analysis of gender and poverty starts from the assumption that women are poorer than men and is primarily based on measures of income poverty, with a greater emphasis on quantitative data than on qualitative indicators. Using the household as the basic unit of analysis, particularly the comparison of female-headed households to male-headed households, the conclusion is drawn that among women, the incidence of poverty is higher and more severe and, in relation to that of men, is increasing. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "feminization of poverty".[48] However, owing to differences in the conceptualization of female-headed households, there is some ambiguity and disagreement as to its meaning and extent. Rural households where the men, particularly husbands, are working away from the land are not necessarily female- headed households. Moreover, if such households receive remittances from the absent men, they would be marginally — if not substantially — better off than households — male- or female-headed — that receive no remittances. Another problem is the assumption of the homogeneity of rural women, without consideration of other factors such as level of education, class, race and region. However, there is consensus that, despite these variations, due to gender inequality, the process and experience of poverty is different for women than it is for men. Further research is needed to quantify and explain the impact of poverty on rural women.

54. An exclusive focus on income poverty results in the design and implementation of policies and programmes that aim principally at income-generating activities for women. This approach has tangible, although short-term, benefits but fails to reflect the full extent of women's poverty. It also fails to deal directly with fundamental concerns such as gender inequality in access to assets and resources.

55. Poverty is a complex phenomenon, and UNDP through the *Human Development Reports* has sought to extend its conceptualization from income poverty to human poverty by incorporating a capabilities/entitlements approach into the analysis.[49] In the case of rural women, such an approach involves considering capabilities such as literacy, levels of health and nutrition, and entitlement to assets and resources such as land, irrigation, capital and extension services. A focus on asset and resource distribution, along with income, provides a more sensitive measure of poverty. This comprehensive approach to poverty yields an unequivocal answer to the question of whether or not women are poorer than men.

56. Gender-based inequality within most households, reinforced and enhanced within the legal, cultural, social, economic, and institutional spheres, contributes to women being poorer then men. The prerogatives that accrue to men within this framework are such that men can, and mostly do, appropriate the labour of women for "their" crops without sharing the income generated from those crops. Since the income will not necessarily be applied to household needs, rural women are left to fend for the household.

57. In addition to using the labour of women for "their" crops, men, having recourse to tradition and cultural norms, may prevent women from engaging in other economic activities, such as gainful employment or self-employment in the informal sector. This denies women opportunities for advancement and perpetuates their low status within the family and society. Although causality has yet to be fully proven, there is a link, at the aggregate level, between gender inequality and human poverty, such that households, in which women have a lower status also tend to be poorer.[50]

58. Poverty tends to reproduce poverty and gender inequality facilitates the intergenerational transmission of poverty through women. A poor, malnourished mother is more likely to give birth to a child of low birth weight. In the case of a girl child, the outlook is very bleak, because gender-based discrimination will reduce her opportunities

to enhance her capabilities and deny her a significant amount of entitlement to productive resources, just as it did to her mother. She will be given early responsibilities, particularly in the reproductive sphere, and she may be forced into early marriage.

59. Gender inequality fosters violence against women. In a poor rural household where women have less access to information about their rights and even lesser access to institutions that are supposed to enforce them, violence tends to persist. Violence against women is not only a violation of human rights; it also has social and economic costs, and reinforces the low status of women which is positively correlated with human poverty.

60. Poverty is reflected in undernourishment and malnourishment, which are common features of life in the rural areas of developing countries and which result mostly from inadequate income or purchasing power, lack of know-how and differential access within the household, rather than from food shortages.[51]

61. There is still substantial hunger, both transitory and chronic, in the rural areas of many developing countries, particularly before the beginning of a new harvest. Poor farming families cannot afford to purchase food just before harvests, when cash resources are lowest and prices are highest. In an attempt to bolster their purchasing capacity, poor rural households are forced to sell their labour, at the expense of their own farming, and obtain credit at high interest rates to ensure survival through the hungry season. They work for richer farmers to guarantee their short-term survival and settle for lower earnings from their own farms. This results in less income and high interest payments in the future and leads to continued indebtedness.[52]

62. Furthermore, small farmers, in their attempt to increase income, switch their focus to cash crops and stop producing or reduce their production of early maturing food crops that would fill the hunger gap between harvests. This leads to a poverty trap characterized by hunger, indebtedness and low-paid hard work. Hunger, however, has a gender dimension. Because of gender inequality within most households, women and girls are at the end of the food chain. Their diet is low in calories and low in protein, which results in weight loss and greater chances of contracting diseases. Hunger inhibits their critical role in food production. When the food security of the household is threatened, the burden of more hard work falls mainly on women, because they have primary responsibility for household food security and therefore have to work harder to make ends meet.

63. Another indicator of poverty is the time burden on women. There are significant time allocation differentials between women and men in the rural areas of developing countries. Women work longer hours than men and carry heavier workloads which involve simultaneously performing multiple roles in both the productive and reproductive spheres. Analysis of time-use patterns in Cameroon showed that women's weekly hours of labour activity were close to 70, compared to 30 for men.[53] Furthermore, village transport surveys in the United Republic of Tanzania and Ghana demonstrate that in transport-related activities, such as collecting water and fuelwood or carrying farm produce to the market, women spend nearly three times as much time as men.[54] The simultaneity of many of the household chores that rural women have to perform increases the intensity of their work.

64. Further, rural women's health concerns reflect the multiplicity of their roles. Their illnesses negatively affect their productive capacities, with detrimental impact on the family's food security and well-being. For example, HIV and AIDS are having a significant impact on the well-being of rural women in terms of their own health, which in turn affects their productive capacity and ability to look after their families. Having the principal responsibility for household food security, their reduced productive capacity has wide implications for rural poverty.

65. The illness of family members due to HIV and AIDS imposes an additional demand on the labour and time of rural women, necessitating extended caregiving on their part as part of their reproductive responsibilities. The burden falls disproportionately on older women and the girl child. A study of six rural districts in Uganda showed an emerging trend among AIDS orphans, who are cared for primarily by their grandparents, particularly grandmothers,[55] in view of socially assigned gender roles.[56] This situation prevails across much of sub-Saharan Africa where HIV and AIDS have emerged as the leading cause of death.[57]

66. Of all the investments made in people, education — particularly primary education — is considered the most effective one for overcoming poverty and achieving income equality. This is particularly true in developing countries where studies have shown consistently higher returns from primary education.[58] The education of girls is particularly critical for securing the future socio-economic well-being of a country and its people. Research has shown that the education of girls improves household nutrition and reduces fertility and child mortality.[59]

67. In spite of the fact that the education of girls will be beneficial to society, girls and women face persistent discrimination in school enrolment, adult education and literacy programmes. The discrimination is pronounced in

many developing countries of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.[60] Gender inequality and poverty, which impose harsh trade-offs within the household, lie at the heart of the bias against girls and women in education. Girls are perceived as less useful than boys and the returns from their education as lower, particularly in the face of labour-market discrimination and cultural practices such as early marriage, which often put women outside the sphere of remunerative work.

### B. Role in agricultural production

68. Rural women are of critical importance in agricultural production and in the rural economies of developing countries, playing through a multiplicity of roles: co-farmers or unpaid family workers on farms or small enterprises owned by the head of the household or other family members; own-account farmers; and/or entrepreneurs in the informal sector. Rural women also work full-time or part-time on large farms and plantations as wage labourers. They also contribute to the subsistence of the household by organizing community-based informal labour- and resource-exchange groups among themselves.

69. In sub-Saharan Africa, women contribute an average of 70 per cent of the total labour expended in food production for the household and for trade. Their contribution ranges from 30 per cent in Sudan to 80 per cent in the Congo. The proportion of women in the economically active labour force in agriculture ranges from 48 per cent in Burkina Faso to 73 per cent in the Congo.[61]

70. In Asia, there are considerable variations by country but, overall, women account for some 50 per cent of agricultural production. They constitute approximately 46 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines, 35 per cent in Malaysia, 54 per cent in Indonesia, and over 60 per cent in Thailand.[62] Asia has experienced a steady increase in female employment in the manufacturing sector since the process of export-led industrialization began. It is not very clear what the impact of the current financial crisis will be on employment patterns in the manufacturing sector and therefore on the extent to which retrenched female labour will revert to the agricultural sector.

71. In the Pacific, women play a dominant role in fisheries and food marketing as well as in the labour-intensive processing of cash crops such as palm oil, copra, coconut oil, vanilla, coffee and cocoa. In Papua New Guinea women make up 71 per cent of the agricultural labour force; in Fiji they constitute about 38 per cent.[63]

72. In most countries of the Middle East and North Africa, women as part of the household labour force play a major role in agriculture. For example, 55.3 per cent of unpaid agricultural labour in Turkey is performed by women; the figure is 53.2 per cent in Morocco, 50.7 per cent in Egypt, 40.7 per cent in Lebanon, 30.7 per cent in Iraq, and 28 per cent in Mauritania.[64]

73. In Latin America and the Caribbean, women contribute an average of 40 per cent to the process of agricultural production, and they are also increasingly employed in the production of non-traditional export crops.[65]

74. In all of these regions, there is significant underreporting of women's participation in the agricultural sector. By not counting the unpaid work of women on family farms, official figures have consistently undervalued the contribution of women to agricultural production. Further, cultural attitudes in some regions lead to reluctance among men to acknowledge the economic activities of their wives and daughters outside the house. The full extent of rural women's role in the agricultural sector, in particular, and in the other sectors of the rural economy is not yet fully quantified and recognized. Further work in terms of research and advocacy within the context of efforts to value the unpaid labour of women is required.

## V. Conclusions and recommendations

75. The present report has shown that the process of globalization, through the pursuit of trade and financial liberalization policies, has direct and indirect effects on the situation of rural women. Deterioration in the terms of trade of commodities reduces the income due to rural women's labour. It also reduces the trade earnings of developing countries and therefore their capacity to invest in rural infrastructure and in building the human capabilities of rural women.

76. The report has also shown that the changing patterns of financial flows, characterized by a decline in development assistance and increased but uneven equity capital flows to developing countries, are forcing countries to pursue policies such as the privatization of productive assets like land. The accompanying commercialization of agriculture is further intensifying the consolidation of landholding. These policy developments tend to exacerbate the socio-economic marginalization of rural women within the existing framework, because of gender inequality. However, liberalization has had some benefits, particularly in providing opportunities for wage employment for rural

women in new sectors such as the non-traditional export sector in agriculture.

77. The present report has illustrated that women, particularly rural women, are poorer than men, as indicated by their lower levels of literacy, education, health and nutritional status, as well as their lesser entitlement to productive assets and resources.

78. The replies to the note verbale and letter of the Secretary-General show that Governments, specialized agencies and other United Nations entities are responding to the challenges facing rural women in many different ways. Some Governments have developed national poverty plans, while others address poverty within the national planning framework. Most of the Governments report having passed laws and established institutions and policies to secure the access of rural women to productive resources and to the necessary inputs and services. The United Nations entities are engaged in assisting Governments to achieve these legal, institutional and policy objectives.

79. Considering the evolving global policy framework, which includes trade and financial liberalization, privatization and commercialization of agriculture, and taking into account the continuing poverty of rural women in spite of their significant contribution to the agricultural sector, in particular, the General Assembly may call upon Member States, the international community and civil society, including non-governmental organizations, to:

(a) Strengthen their continued efforts at meeting the basic needs of rural women through the provision of a safe and reliable water supply, health and nutritional programmes, and education and literacy programmes. Low levels of education and training, poor nutritional and health status, and limited access to resources depress the quality of life of rural women and hinder economic growth. There is, therefore, a need to invest in the human development of rural women by raising their participation in education and ensuring them appropriate health, nutrition and family planning services;

(b) Ensure the full and equal access of rural women to productive resources and services by making a gender perspective an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes developed in response to the global process of market integration and in pursuit of economic development. Rural women provide the nexus between poverty alleviation and sustainable human development in developing countries, and failure to provide them with equal access to productive resources and services or to include their concerns and experiences, on a basis equal to that of men, in policy frameworks and development strategies, results in inefficient and sub-optimal policy and strategy outcomes and perpetuates inequality between women and men;

(c) Devise new development policies and poverty alleviation strategies that mainstream a gender perspective, incorporate a rights-based approach to development, and seek to minimize or offset the negative impacts of globalization on rural women, while consolidating the benefits arising from that process. This can be effected through the support and encouragement of labour-intensive rural industries and diversification into new avenues such as the non-traditional agricultural export sector which has been credited with employment creation for many rural women;

(d) Implement their policies and programmes, in compliance with their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other human rights conventions, with due cognizance of the situation of rural women and the girl child, in order to ensure the full enjoyment of their human rights. Gender inequality within the household, reinforced in society through various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional norms and practices, is responsible for the differential poverty experience and underdevelopment of rural women. Gender inequality and its consequences constitute a violation of the human rights of women;

(e) Pursue the political and socio-economic empowerment of rural women by supporting, by all possible means, their full participation in rural institutions and decision-making at all levels. Access to productive resources and inputs is mediated through social, political and economic institutions such as families and clans, cooperatives, parliaments and banks. Therefore, without the full and equal participation of women in decision-making and in institutions, their interests and concerns may not receive due consideration. This will be detrimental to rural women and will also constrain the outcome of rural development strategies and poverty alleviation efforts;

(f) Revisit the issue of rural women within the context of the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with a view to bringing about a renewed focus on work in this area and to establishing the best approaches to reporting on and disseminating developments pertaining to the improvement of the situation of rural women. The Beijing Platform for Action calls for the formulation and implementation of "policies and programmes that enhance the access of women agricultural and fisheries producers (including subsistence farmers and producers, especially in rural areas) to financial,

technical, extension and marketing services; provide access to and control of land, appropriate infrastructure and technology in order to increase women's incomes and promote household food security, especially in rural areas and, where appropriate, encourage the development of producer-owned, market-based cooperatives".[66]

80. Finally, in order to understand the gender implications of the phenomena of globalization and rural change and to determine, quantify, and explain the extent and nature of female poverty, there is need for further comparative research. Such research is necessary because the available data and existing tools of measurement and analysis are insufficient for a full understanding of the gender implications of the processes of globalization and rural change. Future work directed at the improvement of the situation of rural women should be informed by the findings of such research. In this regard, the General Assembly may call for a clear work programme involving research and consultations in order to determine and document:

(a) The changing patterns of rural women's participation in agricultural production and its implications for national food security;

(b) The role of women's labour in the context of household survival strategies developed to cope with increased economic uncertainty caused by market liberalization;

(c) The differential nature of poverty among women and men and its linkage to gender inequality within the household and society.

*Notes*

[1] The countries that replied were: Cook Islands, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, Peru, Philippines, Russian Federation, Spain, United Republic of Tanzania, and Ukraine. The specialized agencies and United Nations entities that replied were: Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank. The deadline for replies was 1 April 1999, extended to 15 May 1999. The replies from the above-named countries and institutions were received before 15 May.

[2] See *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13) chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

[3] The four world conferences on women (1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995), the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (1979), the World Summit for Children (1990), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the World Conference on Human Rights and the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), and the World Summit for Social Development (1995). The Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women, organized in 1992 under the auspices of IFAD, also dealt extensively with this issue.

[4] See *Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15–26 July 1985* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10) chap. I, sect. A.

[5] See General Assembly resolution 34/180, annex, article 14, para. 1.

[6] See A/40/239 and Add.1, A/44/516, A/48/187–E/1993/76, A/50/257/Rev.1–E/1995/61/Rev.1, and A/52/326.

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[9] S. Lastarria-Cornhiel, "Impact of privatization on gender and property rights in Africa", *World Development*, vol. 25 (1997).

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[12] Idriss Jazairy and others, *The State of World Rural Poverty: An Inquiry into its Causes and Consequences* (New York, New York University Press, 1992).

[13] L. A. Thrupp and others, *Bittersweet Harvest for Global Supermarkets* (Washington, D.C., World Resources Institute, 1995).

[14] Ibid.

[15] A. Stephens, "Gender issues in agricultural and rural development policy in Asia and the Pacific", in *Gender Issues in Agricultural Rural Development Policy in Asia and the Pacific* (Rome FAO, 1995).

[16] *Women in a Changing Global Economy: 1994 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.IV.1).

[17] Such as those from the Cook Islands, El Salvador, Guatemala, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, the Philippines, and the United Republic of Tanzania.

[18] ECA, ECLAC, FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank.

[19] Idriss Jazairy, op. cit.

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[22] Ibid.

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[26] Ibid.

[27] T. P. Tomich and others, *Transforming Agrarian Economies: Opportunities Seized, Opportunities Missed* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995).

[28] Ibid.

[29] I. van de Pol, "Claro, hay que pelear el agua: roles de genero en las actividades de riego", Mimeo (Peru, 1992). Quoted in M. Z. Zwarteveen, cited above.

[30] R. S. Meinzen-Dick and others, "Gender and property rights: an overview", *World Development*, vol. 25 (1997), pp. 1299–1302.

[31] World Bank, *Gender Strategies for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview* (Washington, D.C., 1998).

[32] Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Latvia, Peru, Russian Federation, Spain and Ukraine.

[33] ESCAP, FAO, the World Bank and UNESCO.

[34] Idriss Jazairy, op. cit.

[35] Ibid.

[36] FAO and others, "The potential for improving production tools and implements used by women farmers in Africa" (Rome, 1998).

[37] Ibid.

[38] FAO, *Research and Extension: A Gender Perspective* (Rome, 1996).

[39] Ibid.

[40] FAO, *The Population Parameters of Rural Development* (Rome, 1995).

[41] Mongolia, Mexico and Peru.

[42] Notably IFAD, FAO, the Work Bank, and the ILO.

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] E. W. Nafziger, op. cit.

[48] UNDP, *Poverty Report 1998*.

[49] Ibid.

[50] UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997).

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[62] FAO, *Rural Women and Food Security: Current Situation and Perspectives* (Rome, 1996), and ESCAP, *Country Profiles: Bangladesh (No. 2), Philippines (No. 3), and Thailand (No. 5)* (New York, 1996).

[63] FAO, *Rural Women*.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] See *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Chap. I, resolution 1, annex II, para. 58 (n).